Unit .33

Session .02

The Church Is United in Love

Scripture

Acts 17:16-34

16 While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed when he saw that the city was full of idols. **17** So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and with those who worshiped God, as well as in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. **18** Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also debated with him. Some said, "What is this ignorant show-off trying to say?" Others replied, "He seems to be a preacher of foreign deities"—because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. **19** They took him and brought him to the Areopagus, and said, "May we learn about this new teaching you are presenting? **20** Because what you say sounds strange to us, and we want to know what these things mean." **21** Now all the Athenians and the foreigners residing there spent their time on nothing else but telling or hearing something new. **22** Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said, "People of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. **23** For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed, 'To an Unknown God.' Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. **24** The God who made the world and everything in it—he is Lord of heaven and earth—does not live in shrines made by hands. **25** Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. **26** From one man he has made every nationality to live over the whole earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live. **27** He did this so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. **28** For in him we live and move and have our being, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also his offspring.' **29** Since, then, we are God's offspring, we shouldn't think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination. **30** "Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, **31** because he has set a day when he is going to judge the world in righteousness by the man he has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." **32** When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some began to ridicule him, but others said, "We'd like to hear from you again about this." **33** So Paul left their presence. **34** However, some people joined him and believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, a woman named Damaris, and others with them.

Intro Options

Main Point:
God calls the church to build bridges in order to share the gospel.

Option 1

Imagine someone anonymously writes to your youth group explaining that she can't tell if her friends are genuine or not. The writer comes from a wealthy family, and she thinks her friends care for her, but she can't tell if they are just her friends to gain popularity or to enjoy her nice things. She wants your youth group to help her figure out if her friends truly care for her or not.

Have your kids get into small groups (two or three); each group should come up with one or two ways to test if the friends are genuine or not. These could be good signs to look for, bad signs to look for, or simple questions to ask or things to observe. After giving each group a minute to think up some tests, ask the students to share with the larger group.

What kind of trends show someone doesn't really care for us, but is just using us? What kind of behaviors and attitudes show someone really does care for us?

When Christians witness to others, we can sometimes come across as uncaring. We may be more [redacted] we witnessed than we are concerned for the human beings with whom [redacted] session, Paul will show his heart's burden for the Athenians. Let's look at it and consider how we can be genuinely concerned for the lost (and how we can show that concern).

Split your students into small groups to make skits. Count off the groups by twos. The ones should make a short skit entitled, "A Bad Way to Change Someone's Mind." The twos should make a short skit entitled, "A Good Way to Change Someone's Mind." People can change their minds about anything: what to eat for lunch, how to spend an evening, which team to join, etc. Let kids prepare and show their skits.

Talk about what made the bad ways bad: maybe they changed their minds for the wrong reasons or under unfair pressure (e.g. peer pressure). What made the good ways to change a mind good? Maybe because the person genuinely chose it based on good reasons, good loyalties, or healthy emotions.

Explain that in today's session, we'll look at the ultimate change of mind: becoming a Christian. What are some bad ways to change someone's mind to become a Christian? What are some good ways? Let's see how Paul tackled changing the Athenians' minds in Acts 17.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Acts 17:16-21

On Paul's second missionary journey in Athens, he was struck by the idolatry of the Athenians. His distress over the spiritual darkness of the city did not lead him to bitterness or despair; rather, it moved him to action. In Acts 17, we get a clear glimpse into Paul's heart for the lost and his burden over people's separation from God. This is the Gentile version of Paul's sorrow over unbelieving Jews in Romans 9:1-3. It is out of this love and concern for people that Paul is moved to evangelism.

▪ Why is it important for us to be motivated by love in our evangelism?

When we are motivated by love for people, it will change the way we try to evangelize. Love shapes our tone and enables us not to add barriers or stumbling blocks in front of people beyond the message of the cross and the demands of the gospel itself.

▪ Why is it important for us to be motivated by God's glory in our evangelism?

Paul was also motivated to evangelize out of a concern for God's glory. Jesus is the true and living God who is worthy of our love and worship, but the Athenians were worshiping all kinds of idols and false gods. Love for God and a desire to see Him worshiped like He deserves should move us towards evangelism. When we are motivated by God's glory and love for people, our approach and method will not be selfish or self-seeking, but selfless and self-giving. It's all about God's name and people's souls, not our ambition or pride.

▪ What do we learn about God from Paul's sermon?

It is important that we develop our beliefs about God from the Scriptures themselves. In this text, we learn that God is not an idol (Acts 17:24, 29), that He does not need us (Acts 17:25), that He made us all (Acts 17:26), and that He wants us to know Him (Acts 17:27). Since the purpose of special revelation is to reveal God through Jesus, it is important not only to understand the nature of salvation, but also the nature of God Himself.

99 Essential Doctrines (p. 86, DDG)

Evangelism

It is the duty and privilege of every Christian and of every church of the Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations. The new birth of man's spirit by God's Holy Spirit means the birth of love for others. Missionary effort on the part of all thus rests upon a spiritual necessity of the regenerate life and is expressly and repeatedly commanded in the teachings of Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ has commanded the preaching of the gospel to all nations. It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle.

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God calls the church to build bridges in order to share the gospel.

Acts 17

17:16-21. "Acts is clear that Paul is vexed by the idolatry (v.16), but he finds it important to graciously show the way to the One God…The tone distinct from Romans 1 is the difference between Paul addressing Christians about the fallenness of the culture as a ground for the gospel in Romans and the attempt to make a bridge to the culture in presenting the gospel in Acts."[1]

"Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever."[2]

Activity

Write the following on the board: "I don't want to become a Christian because…" Have your students come up with different ways people might finish that sentence: I don't want to have to obey all Jesus' teachings; I would have to go to church; I want to stay in control of my own life.

Have your students get into small groups and choose one of the reasons from your list. Remind them that in today's session, Paul made a point of contact before he proclaimed the gospel. In each small group, one person will pretend to be the non-Christian due to the reason your group chose (e.g., I don't want to become a Christian because I want to stay in control of my own life). The other people in the group should act out trying to understand that person until they get the other person to say "That's right." Once the non-Christian has said, "That's right," the Christians should try to use that point of contact to proclaim the gospel.

Alternate: You may wish to model this approach for the students, or you could ask for volunteers to role play the Christian-and-unbeliever conversation and then pause the conversation at key moments to ask the larger group for suggestions on how to make a point of contact and then to proclaim the gospel.

Debrief by asking what other points of contact we might make and how we could use those as platforms to proclaim the gospel.

1. Darrell L. Bock, Acts (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament) (Grand Rapids (Mich.), MI: Baker Academic, 2007).
2. John Piper, Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2010).

In Defense (p. 88, DDG)

The gospel demands a response. People will either receive it or reject it, but they will respond in some manner. In this story, some scoff at the idea of the resurrection, while others want to know more. We should be reminded that the gospel often produces a mixed response, and we should be patient with those who are spiritually searching. Some people may be open and interested, but they may not fully commit in one day or one conversation. Like Paul, we must be willing to go on the journey with them over time. God is patient with us, and we should be patient with the people we are trying to reach for Him.

TEACHING PLAN

Read Acts 17:22-29

Paul met his audience where they were at, culturally and spiritually, and brought them to the truth of God. He used their worship of a God they knew to tell them about the true God who they could know through Jesus. He quoted their own poets as a way of demonstrating that God is not an idol, but a living and personal being like us, since we have been made in His image. We must have the wisdom to contextualize the message of the gospel within each culture and setting. It won't look or sound the exact same for us, but the principle remains the same.

- **What are some ways we can find common ground with the world as we try to win people to Christ?**

We may find common ground with people's backgrounds, fundamental beliefs, or opinions. The most pressing example I can think of is in our culture's passion for both justice and for love. Our world is crying out for justice. Deep down, we want a God who does not turn a blind eye to evil; a God whose wrath confirms what we instinctively know to be true about murder, abuse, exploitation, and many other evils. And yet, even though we want a God of justice, it is undeniably true that we also want a God of mercy. We want a God who loves and forgives us.

As it turns out, we get both. Nowhere else in the universe do justice and love come together so perfectly and completely than at the cross of Jesus Christ. At the cross, we find a God of justice, who will leave no sin or evil unaccounted for, and a God who simultaneously offers sinners immeasurable, unmerited, unending mercy. God does not compromise His justice for the sake of mercy, nor His mercy for the sake of justice, but upholds and extends them both in the crucified and resurrected Jesus. God doesn't invite sinners to come and be condemned or to come and be excused, but to come and be forgiven! Our culture wants both justice and love, and we can find that in Jesus. This is one way we can find common ground with the longings and concerns of our culture and demonstrate how Jesus resolves these desires in the gospel.

Read Acts 17:30-34

While the Athenians may have thought there was an "unknown God" (Acts 17:23), God is not unknown. He has revealed Himself in Jesus, and He commands all people to repent (Acts 17:30). There is an urgency to believe the gospel because Paul warns of the coming judgment. God will not excuse anyone or overlook our sins. His patience will have run its course and Jesus will judge the world according to the standard of righteousness (Acts 17:31).

- **How do you think we should include warnings of judgment in our evangelism? How can we avoid making it the whole message, while also not neglecting it altogether?**

Warnings of judgment may seem unloving, but if we truly believe God will judge the world it is the most loving thing we can do. The key is to remember that the gospel is good news, so the main focus of our evangelism should emphasize God's goodness and salvation arriving in Jesus. He was judged in our place, and forgiveness is available to all who trust in Him.

COMMENTARY

Main Point:
God calls the church to build bridges in order to share the gospel.

Acts 17

17:22-29. "As so often in the speeches of Acts, Paul began his discourse with a point of contact with his audience. In this case, it was the altars Paul had already observed in the city (v.16)…This gave him the perfect launching pad for his presentation of monotheism to the polytheistic and pantheistic Athenians."[3]

"Paul appeals to the appreciation of God through the creation as a bridge to the idea of looking for the expression of God's will and plan, an idea Paul will now develop. God will not be discovered through nature alone…One must come to grips with God's revelation…Creation reveals God in his glory, power, care, and attributes but does not speak to God's plan to deliver humanity (Rom. 1:18-32)."[4]

17:30-34. "The drift of his argument was to show that there was but one God, and not many, as they supposed: that all things owed their existence to him, and not to chance: that all things were ordered by him, and not by fate: that all men were bound to live to him, and not unto themselves: and that all should give account of themselves to him at the judgment-seat of Christ; of which event God had given them an assurance, by raising Christ from the dead. As for all the speculations of human wisdom, in which these learned philosophers were so deeply engaged, they were all vain. But 'God, who had hitherto winked at the times of this ignorance, now commanded all men everywhere to repent.'" [5]

"He that pleads for Christ should himself be moved with the prospect of the judgment day."[6]

3. John B. Polhill, Acts: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (The New American Commentary), vol. 26 (Nashville, TN: B & H Pub Group, 2011).

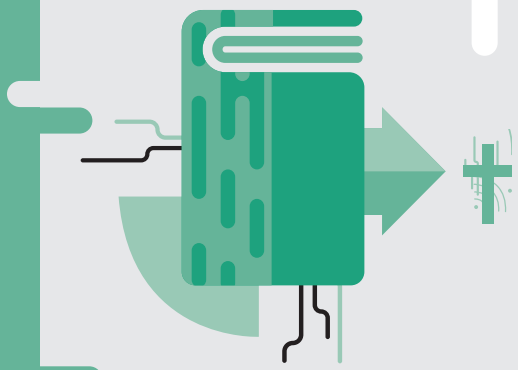
4. Darrell L. Bock, Acts (Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament) (Grand Rapids (Mich.), MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

5. Charles Simeon, Discourse MDCCXC [1790] Repentance Rejoined," in Horae Homileticae or Discourses, Vol XIV (London, England: Holdsworth and Ball, 1833).

6. Charles Spurgeon, The Soul Winner: How to Lead Sinners to the Savior (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963).

(p. 87, DDG) Christ Connection

Paul arrived in Athens to avoid troublemakers in Berea, but while he was there, his heart was stirred by the idolatry of the Athenians. Paul did not miss any opportunity to preach the gospel to those who needed to hear it. Paul was following the example of Jesus, who, out of love, served others and sacrificed Himself for them.



UNITED IN LOVE
God calls the church to build bridges in order to share the gospel.

JESUS CONNECTION
Paul was troubled that the people in Athens worshiped idols. Paul took every opportunity to preach the gospel to those who needed to hear it, following the example of Jesus, who, out of love, served others and sacrificed Himself for them.

LIFEWISE QUALITY
ATTENTIVENESS – Choosing to listen and pay attention to others.

HEAD
How did Paul introduce God to the people of Athens? Why do you think he did this?

What part of the good news did many people in Athens reject?

HEART

How do the voices and ideas we pay attention to affect or influence us? Why is it important to be attentive to what the Bible says about God, about people and about the world?

Paul was attentive to Athens and its people before he taught them about Jesus. How might getting to know someone first help you share about Jesus in a way that can be better understood?

HANDS

Being attentive does not come naturally to most people, but it can be learned. Choose one of the examples below to practice being attentive this week, or come up with your own ideas.

- Repeat back what a parent or coach says to you to make sure you understood them correctly.
- Check the board in your classes for any homework, instructions or notes the teacher has up before asking him or her questions.
- Purposely let your friend talk more than you at lunch. Ask them questions to allow them more time to share, instead of interrupting with your own stories.